

11-15-2014

Regina Hewitt, ed., John Galt: Observations and Conjectures

Anthony Jarrells
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jarrells, Anthony (2014) "Regina Hewitt, ed., John Galt: Observations and Conjectures," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 40: Iss. 1, 228–235.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol40/iss1/20>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Regina Hewitt, ed., John Galt: Observations and Conjectures

Cover Page Footnote

Tony Jarrells, "Regina Hewitt, ed., John Galt: Observations and Conjectures" [review], *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40 (2014): 228-235; (c) *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 2014.

JOHN GALT RECONSIDERED

Regina Hewitt, ed., *John Galt: Observations and Conjectures on Literature, History, and Society*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2012. Pp. viii + 382. Hardback, \$85.00. ISBN 9781611484342.

“Who is John Galt?” is the first sentence in Ayn Rand’s paean to the power of unbridled capitalism, *Atlas Shrugged*, published in 1957. If you

ask Siri this question, or if you type “John Galt” into Google, you will be referred, first, to the Wikipedia entry on Rand’s fictional hero, then to a 2012 *Forbes Magazine* piece on Rand, and after that to an outline of Galt’s big speech in the novel, care of the Atlas Society, a group devoted to “objectivism in life and thought.” In fact, you will have to scroll through several pages and past myriad links to various right-wing sites and tea-party endorsements of Rand’s “philosophy” before you get to an *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on what we might call the real John Galt, the 1779-born Scottish businessman and writer who befriended Lord Byron (and published a *Life* in 1830), founded the Canadian town of Guelph (in 1827), and wrote some of the most innovative and brilliant works of fiction of the period, from his sketches of small town Scottish life that appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* and in such works as *Annals of the Parish* (1821), to big, historical-themed novels about the Covenanting wars and emigration. Galt published an *Autobiography* in 1833 and followed it up a year later with his *Literary Life*. These two works alone suggest a character every bit as complicated as anything from a twentieth-century novel – indeed, a character whose thoughts on politics, history, and the dawning of capitalist modernity make the John Galt of Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* look like nothing more than a caricature of a conservative outlook.

While scholars of Scottish literature – and, increasingly, of nineteenth-century literature more generally – will not need to do a Google search to know who John Galt is, his work nevertheless has received far less attention than it merits. As Regina Hewitt argues in the introduction to her new and very good collection of essays on Galt, this is in part because “Galt’s work overflows the disciplinary categories that have separated literature from history and sociology, Enlightenment from Romantic-era studies” (1). Given the current scholarly moment’s openness to “the convergence of literature, history, and social history in Scottish Enlightenment and Romantic-era culture,” however, Hewitt believes the time is right for a “multiperspectival revaluation” of Galt’s diverse oeuvre (1). And that is precisely what readers will find in *John Galt: Observations and Conjectures on Literature, History, and Society*, published by Bucknell University Press in its “Transits” series. Hewitt’s collection brings together an impressive group of scholars, mostly of Romantic literature but also from eighteenth-century studies, Victorian literature, and Scottish literature. Their contributions are grouped around four themes (“progress, memory, and communities”; “conflict and consensus”; “justice and tolerance”; and “identities and ethics”), and the

essays, though for the most part analyses of one or two of Galt's works, open out onto the very concerns that have made ours an ideal moment for reconsidering Galt's place in literary history, including a new interest in periodicals and other media, in sociological approaches to literature, in Atlantic-world connections and theories of globalization, and in the limitations of literary periods.

Hewitt herself is interested in those places where periods and genres overlap or run up against one another. Her introduction highlights these places through a consideration of an Enlightenment genre that the Romantic-era Galt took quite seriously: conjectural history. As several contributors in the collection note, Galt preferred to think of his works not as novels but rather as "theoretical histories," a phrase used by Dugald Stewart (along with "conjectural history") to refer to a historical approach that starts from how things are in the present and from there imagines how they might have come to be such. Hewitt outlines the relevance of conjectural history for Galt in terms of the "documentary" – what she describes as the idea underpinning conjectural history that societies pass progressively through stages – and the "creative," which describes the way Galt adapts "large-scale studies" of society to "modernity on a small scale" (2). Galt, Hewitt argues, is more interested in the "dynamics" of community than he is in progress writ large. His chronicles of small-town life, for instance, depend on this Enlightenment critical procedure but reorient it to address regional and other kinds of identity, raising doubts in the process about the stability of national identity and the ideal of progress that conjectural histories supported. Of all of the Enlightenment writers, Hewitt explains, it is Adam Ferguson who is the "most important to keep in mind" when thinking about Galt, for he, too, was skeptical about whether the division of labor "guarantee[ed] contented interdependence among different ranks of workers" (7) and questioned the elevation of private over public concerns that featured in the histories penned by fellow literati. Focusing on Galt's complicated engagement with conjectural history allows Hewitt to address concerns that cut across periods. It also provides a way to explore how Galt's literary pursuits "[intersect] with historiography and social theory" (12).

In the collection's first essay, Gerard Carruthers continues Hewitt's discussion of the ways that Galt's work challenges Enlightenment notions of progress with an account of "the tensions in the memorializing (or remembering, or, indeed, misremembering) of Galt in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scottish literary memory" (36). Compared to Robert

Burns or Walter Scott – or even to fellow Greenockians James Watt or “Highland Mary” Campbell – Galt has not received much by way of a memorial. This is in part because he has appeared to many to be less Romantic than contemporaries such as Scott or James Hogg. But it is also because his work has been characterized in terms of a “fiction-restraining Calvinism” (37) that leads less toward the interior divisions of the Caledonian antisyzygy and more to the Scottish kailyard. Carruthers’s analysis brings to light the complex internal tensions that have been obscured by Galt’s “ultimately simpler exterior public life” (48) and links his Presbyterian worldview to a certain subaltern strain that problematizes the improvement narrative underwriting colonial expansion. Like Katie Trumpener before him (in her 1997 book, *Bardic Nationalism*), Carruthers reads Galt as a proto-modernist, a writer who challenges the very ideal of the practical, mostly progressive burgher that Modernist writers then attributed to Galt himself. “Scottish modernism,” Carruthers concludes, “owes an unacknowledged (or suppressed) debt to Galt’s subversive and skeptical views of Scottish life” (36).

After Carruthers’s essay, the collection proceeds mostly – although not completely – chronologically, moving forward in time and outward in space from Galt’s portrayals of parish life to his wider engagements with the past, Europe, and the Atlantic world. The three essays that follow Carruthers’s offer fresh takes on Galt’s early short fiction. Ian Duncan focuses on the serialized fictions that Galt published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* and argues that the “experimental thrust” of works such as *The Ayrshire Legatees* (1820-21) and *The Steam-Boat* (1821) was every bit as “consequential” as that of *Annals of the Parish* (1821) or *The Provost* (1822), both of which have received greater critical attention (54). Caroline McCracken-Flesher looks at *The Steam-Boat* and its journalistic offshoot, “The Gathering of the West” (1823), and suggests that in failing “to rise to the coherence even of short fiction” (73) such pieces provide an alternative to progressive accounts of national community. Plot, like community, can bind, explains McCracken-Flesher. Galt’s short fictional sketches are more “expansive” (75); their interruptions and obstacles to closure provide openings through which a community can speak and find room to move and grow.

Martha Bohrer’s essay heads a new section in the collection, on “conflict and consensus,” but like the two previous essays it also examines Galt’s short fiction, which Bohrer usefully describes as “tales of locale.” Works such as *Annals of the Parish* make Galt a pioneer of the tale of locale, a form characterized by its attention to “the social life

and environment of a small community” (95) and which for Bohrer can count writers from Mary Russell Mitford to Garrison Keillor among its practitioners. In “The Corrective Detective: Genre and Masculinity in *Sir Andrew Wylie of that Ilk*,” Sharon Alker takes Robert Crawford’s suggestion that Hogg’s *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Galt’s *The Majolo* (1816) foreshadow the structure of what would become the modern detective novel and extends it to a reading of *Sir Andrew Wylie* (1822), a novel that brings to the fore the role of masculinity – of “robust Scottish men” (120) – in the emergence of the detective genre. The section concludes with Alyson Bardsley’s essay, “Trauma and Witness in *Ringan Gilhaize*,” which productively situates Galt’s historical novel within recent theoretical discussions about trauma. A central tension of such discussions, Bardsley argues, is between “characterizing trauma as beyond representation” and “working to make that trauma shareable” (145), and this same tension features significantly in Galt’s novel. Her reading shows what trauma studies can bring to the study of Galt but also how Galt’s particular take on historical trauma points to the limits of witnessing as the latter features in contemporary accounts of trauma.

Like Bardsley, Clare A. Simmons’s focus is on Galt’s interest in the past. Her essay, which opens a third section in the book (on “justice and tolerance”) is on *The Entail* (1823), *Sir Andrew Wylie*, and *Rothelan* (1824), three works in which Simmons discovers a largely “ambivalent” stance on medieval values. Elizabeth Kraft, in a fine essay on the figure of the Wandering Jew in the literature of the Romantic period, shows how Galt’s use of the figure differs from that of many of his contemporaries and is more in line with eighteenth-century representations, which employ “Jewish characters and themes” in order to “expose injustices perpetrated in the name of national identity” (203-04). “The Wandering Jew,” argues Kraft, “a figure with a clear identity, though without a homeland, was the perfect character through which to conceptualize emergent relations between the individual, the state, and potential empires” (199). The last two essays of the section are less explicitly concerned with issues of justice or tolerance in Galt’s work. But both provide helpful surveys of the ways Galt was shaped by and contributed to a couple of institutions that do not feature as they should in accounts of his life and work. Frederick Burwick examines Galt’s writings for and about the British theater. Despite an “adversarial stance” on the “contemporary conditions in theater and performance” (229), Burwick argues, Galt approached drama as he approached any other kind of story-

telling, exercising the same “remarkable ingenuity in dramatic composition” (252) that other contributors in this volume associate with his prose fiction. Robert Morrison, in “John Galt’s Angular Magazinity,” reminds us that it was in the pages of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* that Galt “first achieved fame and distinction” (259). Galt wrote a host of tales and essays for the magazine: as Morrison explains, *Blackwood’s* was “at the heart” of his flourishing as a magazinist and a novelist (273). In a fine and nuanced reading of the non-fiction pieces, Morrison shows how Galt’s politics are “more complex and moderate” (263) – and exhibit a greater degree of tolerance – than the vicious brand of Toryism that *Blackwood’s* became known for would lead one to expect.

Hans de Groot, in the final section of the book, turns to the politics of Galt’s fiction. He begins by asking what Galt’s political position is in relation to that of his characters and he concludes, following a reading of *The Provost* and *The Member* (1832), that such a relation is in fact very hard to determine. Galt, he argues, “was careful not to use the fiction as a vehicle to air his political opinions” (294). De Groot’s interest in character is taken up in another essay in this section, Angela Esterhammer’s excellent “Agency, Destiny, and National Character: John Galt and Europe.” Esterhammer argues that Galt’s engagement with Europe is more extensive than is usually recognized. Galt, she suggests, was not just a writer who worked in the shadow of Scott, as Ian Duncan has persuasively argued: “his formative travels in the Mediterranean and his responses to European literature locate much of his writing, even his Scottish fiction, in yet another ambit – that of cosmopolitan contemporaries such as Byron and Goethe” (324-25). We can see such an engagement in two paradigms of culture evident in his works, both of them “European- inflected.” The first is what Esterhammer labels “the improviser,” of Italian provenance: the improviser is a character open to contingencies and can be seen in works such as *Voyages and Travels* (1812), *The Earthquake* (1820), and *Andrew of Padua* (1820). The second paradigm, increasingly visible in Galt’s later works, such as “The Quarantine” (1824) and *The Omen* (1825), is “German-Gothic” – a character whose fate has “been determined in advance by forces beyond [his] control” (325-26). In between de Groot’s essay and Esterhammer’s is another piece on Galt and the world beyond Scottish and British borders. In “Time, Emigration, and the Circum-Atlantic World,” Kenneth McNeil asks, “on which side of the Atlantic should we situate John Galt?” (299). His answer, effectively, is neither one: rather than see him either as a Canadian writer or as a Scottish writer, McNeil “situate[s]

Bogle Corbet and the outpouring of Galt's work devoted to new world settlement and emigration within the context of the transatlantic, or more precisely, the circum-atlantic world" (301). Interestingly, in situating Galt such, McNeil reads *Bogle Corbett* (1831) similarly to the ways that other contributors to the volume read the Scottish novels: as an alternative to Enlightenment- and nation-based histories and as foregrounding themes of "impermanency and migration" (310).

In the book's concluding essay, Hewitt returns to the intersections between the literary and the sociological that she introduces at the start of the volume. Her essay, "John Galt, Harriet Martineau, and the Role of the Social Theorist," moves from an implicit acknowledgement of Galt's keen eye for "social affairs" to an estimation of his work that sees him explicitly as "a social theorist" (345). In negotiating the split that would come to feature in so much scholarship on his life and work – that between being a writer and "a man of business or worldly affairs" (1) – Galt constantly had to think about how and whether the former (his writing) might be understood as useful in terms of the latter (the business of the world). "In the process," argues Hewitt, "he envisioned the role of the social theorist, though he did not name it, as a specialized knowledge worker who could develop observations about human conduct into a product that, while still intangible, clearly conveyed useful information" (347). The issue of how or whether knowledge-work is valuable goes back at least as far as Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), as Hewitt notes. And certainly it is one still very much alive in the present, as literary scholars wonder about the value of yet another close reading of this or that text, or about whether a turn to the digital is rendering our medium of analysis – print – obsolete, or about the death of the Humanities more generally. Hewitt reads Galt's *Voyages and Travels* and *Eben Erskine; or, The Traveller* (1833) in relation to the work of another writer-cum-social theorist, Harriet Martineau, and shows how both push for a more outward-looking approach to writing, one in which the self-involvement of the literary professional gives way to the greater sense of duty and responsibility that both Galt and Martineau associated with the traveler.

That is a wonderful thought. Hewitt's introduction, and indeed the collection as a whole, points to a number of trends and concerns that make our current scholarly moment ideal for reconsidering Galt's prolific output. Her concluding essay, though, reveals Galt himself to be a writer ideal for reconsidering that same scholarly moment – not to undo developments in the field that have been propitious for bringing Galt back

into conversations about literature, history, and society, but instead to foreground “conjectures about the roles that [intellectual laborers] might fill and the products they might create” (364). Nearly 200 years after his death, it might again be time to think about how the kinds of work we as literary professionals do can or should be valued.

Tony Jarrells

University of South Carolina